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SUBJECT: GORKHAS PURSUE POLITICAL STRATEGY TO FURTHER STATEHOOD
MOVEMENT

REF: A. A) KOLKATA 130
[1](#)B. B) 08 KOLKATA 179
[1](#)C. C) 08 KOLKATA 177
[1](#)D. D) 08 KOLKATA 66

KOLKATA 00000215 001.2 OF 002

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: For the past two years, the new political party Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) has increased its efforts to carve out a new Indian state - Gorkhaland - from the existing state of West Bengal. Like other political parties in West Bengal, GJMM uses force and intimidation but it is not an armed insurgency. To further its cause, the GJMM has boycotted the now-defunct local governance body, organized strikes, and encouraged residents to withhold revenue and utility payments to the state government. The GJMM decision to support Jaswant Singh, a senior politician from the national opposition party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), rather than field its own candidate in the recent 2009 parliamentary polls, has increased public awareness of the Gorkhaland cause, but is unlikely to result in any national legislative action. Local sentiment in the affected area revolves not around if, but rather when and with what boundaries, a new state will arise. However, the West Bengal state government and most political parties, with the exception of the BJP, remain steadfastly opposed. While the GJMM has been able to get the central and state governments to agree to tripartite talks, the realization of its goal of a new Gorkhaland state by 2010 is difficult to imagine. This cable replaces Reftel A.

Darjeeling - Queen of the Hills and "Capital of Gorkhaland?"

[1](#)2. (SBU) Darjeeling is the name of an administrative district and a city in the northern portion of West Bengal bordering Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. There is a large Indian army presence in this strategically important area, which connects the remote northeastern states with mainland India. Darjeeling is best known for its premium tea and as a destination for local and foreign, including American tourists. It is affectionately referred to as the Queen of the Hills, as the most beautiful and charming of all of the Indian hill stations. The district can be roughly divided into two areas: the Darjeeling Hills and the Dooars Plains. While the city of Darjeeling, also the district's administrative seat, lies in the Hills, the largest city in the district is the important trade and transit town of Siliguri in the Plains. The GJMM has demanded roughly 7,000 square kilometers for a separate state which it calls Gorkhaland with approximately 2.6 million inhabitants spread across the Hills, where they represent an overwhelming majority, and the contiguous Plains, where they are a minority among tribals and other ethnicities.

The Birth of Bimal Gurung's GJMM

¶3. (SBU) In 2007 Bimal Gurung established the GJMM to further the cause of statehood (Reftel D). Gurung exiled his former boss, Subash Ghising, who had led the local administrative body, the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), after prevailing in a power struggle. The DGHC had been formed as a result of the 1988 tripartite agreement involving the Government of India, the Government of West Bengal and the Gorkha National Liberation Front, which had ended the violent 1986-1988 agitation that had claimed 1,200 lives. The DGHC is now effectively defunct as its members have resigned and a non-elected administrator is currently overseeing the basic delivery of municipal and development services. Ghising remains exiled from the Darjeeling Hills, and widely unpopular within the Gorkha community due to his alleged corruption and administrative incompetency.

Tactics of a Political Movement: Withholding Payment and Striking

¶4. (SBU) During a meeting with PolOFF on May 6, GJMM central committee member Amar Lama explained the current Gorkhaland movement's democratic, political nature. He asserted that they are using non-cooperation and strikes as tactics to force the state government to agree to a Gorkhaland state. For example, since April 2008 residents of the Hills have not paid municipal taxes or electrical or telephone bills (services which continue to be provided despite non-payment). He acknowledged the disruptive and inconvenient nature of the strikes targeting commerce and transportation, but indicated that the GJMM found them a useful tactic to generate awareness for their cause and force the state government to sit and talk. The most recent two-week strike in July was widely observed by shops and offices and there were no reported incidents of violence, in contrast

KOLKATA 00000215 002.2 OF 002

with last year's strike (See Reftels B, C). The strike was successful in forcing the government to agree to a third round of tripartite talks scheduled to take place on August 11. The GJMM has also formed a several thousand member strong community policing force known as Gorkhaland Personnel. They generally wear uniforms and carry batons. There have been no recent reports of the GJMM or its youth wing taking part in any lethal arms training or collaborating with any of the banned armed insurgent groups operating in West Bengal or the Northeast.

Seeking Political Support for Gorkhaland

¶5. (SBU) According to Lama, the GJMM supported BJP after the national party decided to "sympathetically consider" its demand for statehood. Rather than field its own parliamentary candidate, the GJMM believed having a Member of Parliament from a national party would bring national attention to its quest for a Gorkhaland state. It approached both the Congress and the BJP for political support, but only the BJP was willing to include consideration of their cause in its manifesto. The idea of a separate Gorkhaland state, while popular among Gorkhas in Darjeeling, remains unpopular throughout the rest of the state. Since the BJP has an insignificant presence in West Bengal, it has little to lose politically by supporting Gorkhaland.

Challenges to Statehood: Boundaries and Emotions

¶6. (SBU) In order to gain additional political support, proponents of Gorkhaland will have to address Darjeeling's tribal population's concerns about the proposed state's boundaries and Bengali's emotional attachment to Darjeeling. The GJMM has demanded both the ethnically homogenous Gorkha Hills, where the majority of the population are Nepalese, and the more heterogeneous Plains, where the tribals dominate. A leader of the tribal organization Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas

Parisad told PolOFF that the tribals are not against the Gorkhaland demand for statehood in the Hills, but that this demand should not extend to the Plains. The more difficult question may be the further partition of the state of West Bengal, which has already been once attempted (1905-1911), and once realized (1947). Bengalis are proud of their state stretching from the Bay of Bengal to the Hills of Darjeeling and are unlikely to willingly cede Darjeeling to Gorkhaland. Some interlocutors, including private, unofficial comments from Eastern Army Commander LTG Singh, have spoken about the hypothetical possibility of a portion of Darjeeling becoming a Union Territory within India, as opposed to a state, as this can be created by an Act of Parliament without the consent of the state assembly. However, the GJMM is resolute in its demand for full statehood and furthermore believes that the consent of West Bengal is not required. While Indian Constitutional law is unclear on this point, precedent has been that the affected states concur.

Comment

17. (SBU) Given the popular support among the Gorkhas in Darjeeling, it is very likely that Gorkhas will eventually achieve some form of political separation from West Bengal, the only questions are when, in what form, and through which means. The GJMM appears to have matured in its strategic thinking, minimizing the use of violence and focusing on politically acceptable forms of protest such as disruptive strikes, withholding payment and addressing the issue in Parliament to pressure the state and central government to negotiate. The lack of violence during the recent July strike is an encouraging sign as the current movement appears to be eschewing the violent tactics of the 1980s in favor of dialogue. However, like other political parties in West Bengal, the GJMM still appears to use intimidation and the threat of force to gain political support and enforce strikes. While Darjeeling's new parliamentary representative Jaswant Singh may be able to accomplish little legislatively given the weak position of the BJP, he has already been able to highlight the quest for Gorkhaland in Parliament and may be able to generate greater national awareness for Gorkhaland. It is unlikely that any West Bengal politician, from either the ruling or opposition parties, will support a separate Gorkhaland state, given the emotional connection upper class Bengalis have with the Darjeeling Hills and the painful memories many Bengalis have of the 1947 partition of Bengal. While the GJMM has been able to get the central and state governments to agree to a new round of tripartite talks, the realization of its goal of a new Gorkhaland state by 2010 is difficult to imagine.

PAYNE